



Figure 1. Adult males / mâles adultes *Parmoptila jamesoni* © Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium (Alain Reygel)



Figure 2. Adult females / femelles adultes *Parmoptila jamesoni* © Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium (Alain Reygel)

Confusing antpeckers

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Des parmoptiles problématiques. L'auteur rapporte l'observation d'un couple de parmoptiles dans la forêt de Bwindi, Ouganda. Après avoir constaté que les illustrations des parmoptiles dans plusieurs des ouvrages consultés ne correspondaient pas aux oiseaux vus, l'auteur a appris que des études récentes ont conclu que le genre *Parmoptila* comprend trois, et non deux, espèces: *Parmoptila rubrifrons*, *P. woodhousei* et *P. jamesoni*. En Afrique de l'Est, il s'agit de la dernière espèce (précédemment traitée comme une sous-espèce de *P. woodhousei*), dont le mâle ressemble au mâle *rubrifrons*, mais avec les joues de la même couleur brun-roux que les parties inférieures, et non sombres pointillées de blanc, tandis que la femelle ressemble à la femelle *woodhousei*, mais avec les parties inférieures marquées de barres ou de croissants, plutôt que de petites taches.

On 9 August 2002, while birding with three colleagues and our guide (Hassan Mutebi) in roadside forest at The Neck, between Buhoma and Ruhija, Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, in south-west Uganda, I observed a small passerine feeding in a dense tangle of vines c2 m above ground. My initial impression was that it superficially resembled a Red-faced Woodland Warbler *Phylloscopus laetus* but, with better views, it clearly was not this species. The bird was grey-brown above with a rufous supercilium and face, the latter colour extending onto the throat and upper breast, and contrasting with the rest of the underparts, which were whitish, barred grey.

I drew the attention of the other observers (John Clark, Brian Foster, Mike Shaw and HM) to the bird and continued to watch it as it climbed the tangle. I was more than a little surprised to hear my companions describe a bird quite unlike the one I was watching. It soon became obvious that there were two birds in the same tangle, but none of us could locate both. Following some frantic searching, both birds disappeared high into the tangle and we resorted to leafing through the recently published *Field Guide to the Birds of East Africa*³. We concluded that we had been watching the bird described, on Plate 269, as Woodhouse's Antpecker *Parmoptila woodhousei*. My companions had seen a male and myself a female. The illustration of the male was apparently quite accurate, but the female was strikingly different to the bird I had been watching. In particular, the breast is illustrated as being densely spotted, whereas the bird I saw appeared to have a narrowly scaled or barred breast.

Upon our return to the UK, we checked other modern literature, including Clement *et al*¹. On Plate 38 of that guide two species are illustrated: Flowerpecker Weaver-finch *Parmoptila woodhousei*, and Red-fronted Flowerpecker Weaver-finch *P. rubrifrons*. The female *P. woodhousei* resembles the bird I saw but, again, the breast is shown as being irregularly spotted, as in Stevenson & Fanshawe³, rather than barred. Furthermore, the species is illustrated as being sexually monomorphic, with the male and female virtually identical, and mapped only for West Africa, not extending as far east as Uganda. In contrast, the range of *P. rubrifrons* is considered to reach Uganda, and the male superficially resembles the male *P. woodhousei* of Stevenson & Fanshawe³. However, it is depicted as having dark cheeks, rather than the rusty cheeks observed by my companions. Moreover, the female *P. rubrifrons* lacks the rusty cheeks of female *P. woodhousei*.

By now thoroughly confused, I continued to check other literature and found, with relief, that the illustrations of both male and female *Parmoptila* in van Perlo² appeared correct. However, van Perlo² names the species *P. rubrifrons*, although the plumages of both sexes differ from the species of the same name in Clement *et al*¹. Further adding to the confusion, the illustrations in Stevenson & Fanshawe³ appear to be a male *P. rubrifrons* (after van Perlo²) and a female *P. woodhousei*. I contacted Norman Arlott, who illustrated Stevenson & Fanshawe³ and who informed me that he had based his illustrations on skins in the Natural History Museum (Tring),

but I subsequently learned that this institution has no female *Parmoptila* specimens from Uganda. I began to consider that the *Parmoptila* I had observed in Uganda is either a distinctive subspecies of *P. rubrifrons* or that the genus contains three species, rather than the two illustrated in the current literature. The Ugandan *Parmoptila* is dimorphic, as illustrated by van Perlo², but Clement *et al*¹ illustrate only *P. rubrifrons*; although they do mention *P. r. jamesoni* for western Uganda, only the male plumage is described. To confirm this, I contacted Dr Michel Louette, at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, in Tervuren (Belgium), who kindly supplied a verbal description (and subsequently photographs) of *Parmoptila* specimens from the Belgian Congo, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, close to the Ugandan border. The descriptions closely matched those of the birds observed by myself and my colleagues in Uganda, particularly the barred breast of the female.

In an attempt to avoid further confusion being promulgated in the literature, I contacted Martin Woodcock, who I was aware was illustrating the final volume of the *Birds of Africa*. He has subsequently reviewed the history and systematics of the *Parmoptila* genus and concluded that it does, indeed, comprise three species:

- Red-fronted Antpecker *Parmoptila rubrifrons* (in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, with a claim from southern Mali presumably based on a misidentification; R. Demey pers comm);
- Woodhouse's Antpecker *P. woodhousei* (from south-east Nigeria through southern Cameroon and Gabon to the western Democratic Republic of Congo);
- Jameson's Antpecker *P. jamesoni* (in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, western Uganda and north-west Tanzania)⁴.

This taxonomy was widely accepted during the early-20th century, but then apparently forgotten during a bout of lumping since the 1940s.

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References

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